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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing trend toward retention in grade of low-achieving students and apparent public support for the practice, many educators and psychologists disagree with the perception that flunking is an appropriate response to poor academic performance. Research reported in the past two decades indicates that grade-level retention produces little improvement in student achievement. Some studies presented evidence that students required to repeat a grade actually made less progress than comparable classmates who were promoted. In addition, there are many studies that demonstrate significant psychological damage to children, particularly in terms of lowered self-esteem. Still others associate an increase in the dropout level with retention in grade. In Florida, a number of approaches to improving student achievement without resorting to grade retention have been proposed. Among them are the following: (1) tutorial programs, including peer tutoring, cross-age tutoring, and adult volunteer tutoring, coordinated with classroom instruction; (2) extended basic skills programs, which eliminate "non-essentials" from the student day, with the additional time being applied to reading, writing, and mathematics; (3) cooperative learning programs; (4) extended-year programs, achieved in Florida because of funding constraints through summer school; and (5) individualized instruction through such technologies as interactive video, word processing, and story starters. (Contains 36 references.) (AC)

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RETENTION IN GRADE: LETHAL LESSONS?

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Overview

Public school education at the national, state, and local levels is currently receiving unprecedented attention. The America 2000 movement, paralleled by Florida's School Improvement legislation, is challenging the assumptions, operations, expenses, and outcomes of instruction in the classrooms supported by public funds.

Florida's emphasis on student achievement in the public schools began with the Educational Accountability Act in 1976 (Florida Statutes 230, passim). Increased requirements for high school graduation, minimum competency tests in reading, language arts, and mathematics at several grade levels, and an exit examination for a high school diploma were all instituted as part of the academic upgrading process.

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The result has "unquestionably emphasized academic achievement throughout the state. Once regarded as a typical Southern state with education to match, Florida has become a leader in many aspects of public education" (Sherwood, 1990).

One outcome of the concern for academic performance in Florida has been an increase in the retention of students in grade, especially at the elementary school level. The practice grew rapidly during the late 1980's: in 1985, approximately 6% of all kindergarten students were required to repeat their first year of school. By 1988, that proportion had increased to 12%, a total of 17,107 children. In 1989, the number grew to 19,016 students (ibid.).

On a national level, retention in grade affects approximately 2.6 million children each year,and is growing by about 20% each year. The practice is justified by both parents and educators as essential to assure high academic standards (Educational Research Newsletter, 1991).

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However, statistics from the 1990 Census suggest that retention and school dropouts have increased significantly during the past decade (Kominski, 1992). The report contrasted a 1990 dropout/retention rate of 34.8% with the 29.1% rate in 1980. The study showed that 40% of boys and 29% of girls between the ages of 15 and 17 had either repeated one or more grades, or had dropped of school entirely. Differences among ethnic groups were also apparent; among males, the dropout/retention rate for blacks was 53.3%, for Hispanics, 52.8%, and for whites, 37.4%. For females, the rate was 44.4% for Hispanics, 42.7% for blacks, and 26.3% for whites. "A great deal of falling behind in school occurs at an early age for black and Hispanic students," Kominski said.

Retention of students (a euphemism for failing or flunking) was a part of the American educational scene from the beginning of graded instruction in the nineteenth century until the 1930's. Intense interest in child psychology during the depression years brought an end to grade-level retention in most schools when failure was linked to negative social and psychological effects (Hess, 1978).

In the past decade, however, the practice of retention has revived. In many schools and communities it is seen as a way to maintain or increase standards. "Many believe that repeating a grade is an effective remedy for students who have failed to master basic skills. Therefore, grade retention is relatively prevalent in this nation....By ninth grade approximately 50% of all students in the U.S. have flunked at least one grade (or are no longer in school)" (CPRE Policy Briefs, 1990. p. 1).

Educators have strong support from their communities for retaining students. "In a 1986 Gallup Poll, 72% of U.S. citizenry favored stricter grade-to-grade promotion standards. Such public support creates strong political pressures on schools to maintain acceptably high levels of grade retention as proof of high standards" (ibid., p.2).

Shepard and Smith (1990), who have conducted extensive research on public school retention, concluded: "Public belief in the efficacy of retention creates a powerful mandate: Flunk poor-achieving students for their own good as well as for society's good" (p. 85).

Despite the apparent public support for retention in grade of low-achieving students, many educators and psychologists disagree with the perception that flunking is an appropriate response to poor academic performance. Research reported in the last two decades indicates that grade-level retention produces little improvement in student achievement. In addition, there are many studies that demonstrate significant psychological damage to children.

Retention and Student Achievement

In their 1988 Delegate Assembly, the National Association of School Psychologists adopted the following position statement: "The retention of students, while widely practiced, is in large measure not substantiated by sound research. The cumulative evidence indicates that retention decisions cannot be validated using any standardized or competency-based tests and that retention can negatively affect achievement and social-emotional adjustment" (n.p.).

During the decade of the 1980's, many educational researchers pointed out that retention could not be supported as a means of correcting student deficiencies. Norton (1983) reported that non-promotion did not improve pupil achievement. Shepard and Smith (1987) presented evidence that students who were required to repeat a grade actually made less progress than comparable classmates who were promoted (pp. 129-134).

In a longitudinal study in Michigan, Delidow (1989) used the California Achievement Test to ascertain the progress of retained students from 1980 to 1988. Data analysis considered students' sex, age, retentions, socio-economic status, and special education and federal Chapter 1 services. He concluded that: (1) males are more likely to be retained and double retained than females; (2) retained males are more likely to be assigned to special education classes; (3) test score analysis indicated that there was little long-term benefit from retention; (4) retained males and females do not achieve differently after retention; (5) non-retained students perform academically better than retained students; (6) non-retained students perform academically better on the average over time than do retained students, and (7) retained students are more likely to be economically disadvantaged.

Similar results of academic achievement research has been reported consistently for more than 20 years. Gaite (1969) studied the course grades of 642 students in grades eight to eleven to determine whether retention improved their subject mastery. He concluded that "the gain was hardly sufficient to justify a whole year's extra work...It was concluded that non-promotion could not be justified on the grounds that it would result in a meaningful improvement in performance" (p. 11).

Koons (1977) found that low-achieving children who were promoted scored higher on standardized achievement tests than similar students who repeated a grade. In a 1985 study, Schuyler reported similar results. Her findings indicated that students who were promoted generally showed better gains than similar students who were retained. Niklason (1984) published a controlled study of retainees and non-retainees which demonstrated that retention did not benefit children academically.

Shepard and Smith (1988) found that the gains sometimes reported for very young children were not maintained as the children progressed through the elementary grades. They commented:

> Kindergarten teachers, however, are generally unaware of these end results. They know only that the retained children are doing better than they did in their first year of kindergarten...For these few transitory academic benefits, retained children pay with a year of their lives. And, they understand that they could not go on with their classmates because of something that was wrong with them (p. 35).

In a review of developmentally appropriate instruction for young children, the National Association of State Boards of Education (1988) took the position that:

> ...it is true that research shows that children can be taught successfully in the early school years to count, learn phonics, and complete other academic tasks, and that such instruction will result in short-term improvements on standardized test scores. However, there is also evidence that the introduction of basic skills before a child is ready may undermine a child's disposition to use these skills over the long term. In addition, when academic work is introduced too early, some children will inevitably "fail" due to high variability of rates of development, and feel incompetent and distrustful of their ability to cope with a school setting (p. 4).

Shepard and Smith (1988) reached similar conclusions:

> The current fad to flunk children in kindergarten is the product of inappropriate curriculum. Over the past 20 years there has been a persistent escalation of academic demand in kindergarten and first grade. What were formerly next-grade expectations are shoved downward into the lower grade....Long hours of drill-and-practice on isolated skills are detrimental to all children, even those who are able to meet the demands...More seriously, fixed, higher standards injure at-risk pupils, causing many more children to fail who would have, in due course, done quite well" (p. 37).

In an extensive study at the University of Georgia, Holmes (1983) conducted a meta-analysis of the available controlled research on the effects of retention in grade on student achievement. He found that, in general, students who were retained fell behind during their first year of retention, and never were able to catch up to their peers in the rest of their school years.

In a Phi Delta Kappan article, Doyle (1989) decried the "resistance of conventional wisdom to research evidence." He pointed out that there is "no widespread educational practice that has been as thoroughly discredited as retention in grade...the task is to uproot outdated misconceptions appealing to educators' "common sense" wisdom" (p. 219). The task has proved to be extremely difficult; the attitude among educators and parents alike ranges from the expectation that another year will lead to success to the belief that the students deserve to be retained because of their lack of effort.

There is a widespread perception that lack of rigor in U.S. schools, exemplified by social promotions, is the cause of the country's low ranking in international comparisons of student test data. Invidious contrasts of the achievement of U.S. students with those from Asian and European countries are often cited. In this context, it is interesting to note that the retention rate in the primary grades in Japan and the United Kingdom is 0%; the rate for Europe and the former Soviet Union is 2% (Center for Policy Research in Education, 1990).

Psychological Impact of Retention

Another aspect of child development that must be considered are the short-term and long-term effects of repeating grades. In a recent review of the research on retention, Natale (1991) listed problems with student self-esteem and an increase in the dropout level associated with retention in grade. Another practice that was common in the 1980's, the use of a transition year between kindergarten and first grade, was also shown to be harmful.

An older study (Bossing and Brien, 1980) reported that "retention due to the immaturity of students" showed less conclusive results. A positive element was the apparent improvement of some students in school adjustment. The study indicated that, despite other negative research, teachers and parents did not believe that children's self-concept was damaged by nonpromotion.

The preponderance of research evidence over the past twenty years, however, has underscored the potential harm done by elementary school retentions. Godfrey (1972) considered retention to be "a tragedy." White and Howard (1973) reported that one retention resulted in lowered self-concept, and that a second failure produced even more negative results.

Berliner and Casanova (1986) argued that "those who decide to keep a child in an elementary grade for an additional year do so despite very persuasive research evidence that negative effects consistently outweigh positive outcomes" (p. 14). Retention is perceived to

be entirely the fault of the student, and is therefore a punishment rather than a means of improving achievement.

In a study of middle school students, Purkerson (1981) found that retention had a negative impact on students' self-esteem, their status among their peers, and their personality development. He urged that"teachers and school administrators should give high priority to discovering innovative methods for reaching problem students...rerouting low-achieving or immature students through the same course one, two, or three years in a row is not an answer."

When students are asked directly about the impact of retention, they are emphatic about their feelings. Byrnes (1989) interviewed a large sample of children who had been held back in grade. Of the group, 87% said that being retained made them feel "sad, bad, upset, or embarrassed." Only 6% gave positive answers, such as "you learn more" or "it lets you catch up" (p. 180).

The most poignant, and probably the most quoted, statement of children's perception of nonpromotion was reported by Yamamoto (1980). Children in his study "rated the prospect of repeating a grade as more stressful than 'wetting in class' or being caught stealing. The only two life events that children said would be more stressful than being retained are going blind or losing a parent" (pp. 6-8). This provides a stark contrast with the "conventional wisdom" that retention in the early grades is not harmful to children.

The scars of early retention appear to be long-lasting. Berliner (1986) repeated Yamamoto's research with post-high school students to determine whether their additional maturity had changed their view of nonpromotion. He asked students to rank the psychological trauma of 15 different life experiences. The results were similar, although even stronger, than those of the earlier study: 95% of the young adults ranked being retained in elementary school as equivalent to losing a parent or going blind.

In view of the consistent outcomes of research on the potential psychological dangers of retention, it is difficult to accept its pervasive use in American elementary schools. Whether the purpose is to "make them master the basics" or to "give them the gift of time," the results appear to be equally sanguinary. In a 1990 technical assistance paper, the Florida Division of Public Schools made its position clear: "Research on the subject is clear--grade level retention does not work. Further, it would be difficult to find another educational practice on which the research findings are so unequivocally negative." Nevertheless, a recent issue of the Wall Street Journal (June 16, 1992) reported that some parents bring pressure on schools to retain their children. One was quoted as saying, "Forget the research, you should use your common sense."

Aggravating the Dropout Problem

Parent and educator beliefs in the value of retention in the short run cannot survive longitudinal studies of the causes of school dropout. The National Association of School Psychologists (1988) warned "against the practice at any age...retention shows no clear benefits for students in terms of academic gains, personal-social growth, or improvement in attitudes toward school. Furthermore, the policy of retention has increasingly been criticized for having negative effects in all these areas, and has become increasingly associated with increasing risk of dropping out of school" (p. 1).

In the largest recent study of the long-term effect of retention in grade, Rice, Toles, and Schulz (1989) followed students in Chicago through their academic careers. They reported that students who had been retained were significantly more likely to drop out of school than those who made normal progress through the grades. Of the students who were one year older than their classmates when they entered high school, more than 50% dropped out. Of the students who were two years older than their classmates, two-thirds dropped out.

In a similar study, Hill (1989) also reported that students who are retained, "even at the kindergarten or first grade level, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are at risk of dropping out later on." Hill also indicated that current approaches to dropout prevention, including alternative and pullout programs, may be inappropriate. He suggested that fundamental changes are needed in the educational system:

> First, teachers and administrators must realize that education should not be a selective process where curriculum, tests, behavioral objectives, and retention policies are developed for the purpose of screening people out of the system. Second, the realization must come that quantitative assessments that measure attainment of skills are devices that have no relationship to quality, but rather tend to reduce the creativity in learning and encourage mediocrity in teaching.

The trend away from nonpromotion is evident nationwide. The Association of California School Administrators (1980) reported that "the ready availability of retention can encourage discrimination on racial, sexual, and socioeconomic grounds. Misuse of retention can be discouraged through involvement of parents, teachers, and specialists in the decision-making process." Educational Research Newsletter (1991) reported that "Several states are now encouraging schools to do away with retention in any form. Some elementary schools are using nongraded primary units to enable children to work toward achievement goals that are measured only when developmental differences tend to even out--usually when children are about 9 years old."

Alternatives to Retention

A legitimate question from parents, educators, and school board members is, "If retention doesn't work for low-achieving children, what is the answer?" Social promotion, which was the norm for public schools in the 1950's and 1960's, did not assure academic growth (Cooke and Stammer, 1985). Students quickly perceived that there was no penalty for not working; diligence and indifference received exactly the same reward--movement to the next grade. The result was a general lowering of effort: for the most part, students will reach to achieve what is expected of them.

Continuous progress programs, which allowed each child to proceed through a planned set of learning tasks, created both individual and family problems. Highly individualized systems approaches produced rote learning, but failed to prepare students to apply skills and knowledge. Minimum competency instruction, monitored by state-mand d tests, created a downward pressure on higher-level skills by supplanting creative teac and learning.

A number of suggestions have emerged from research. Shepard and Smith (1990) stated that:

> ...retention does not improve achievement but promotion plus remediation does...there is reason to believe that struggling students need a more inspired and engaging curriculum, one that involves solving meaningful problems, rather than repetitive, by-rote drills on basic skills. Outmoded learning theories require children to master component skills before they are allowed to go on to comprehension and problem-solving; this theory consigns slow learners to school work that is not only boring but devoid of any connection to the kinds of problems they encounter in the real world (p. 86).

The path for educators and communities to follow is not obscure, nor has it been discovered recently. In a 1973 report, Reiter pointed out that "for maximal learning to take place, the crucial issue is how the individual pupil is treated in his school. [The need is for] human treatment of each pupil as a person of value, and creative provision of appropriate learning tasks in which the individual pupil can experience success."

In Florida, a number of approaches to improving student achievement without resorting to retention have been proposed (Sherwood, 1990). Among them are:

1. *Tutorial programs*, including peer tutoring, cross-age tutoring, and adult volunteer tutoring. These need to be coordinated with classroom instruction, and be in addition to, not a substitute for, regular teaching. The Reading Recovery program, which originated in New Zealand, is demonstrating remarkable success in many districts.

2. *Extended basic skills programs.* These eliminate "non-essentials" from the student day, with the additional time being applied to reading, writing, and mathematics. While this approach has been successful, there are often political problems with the elimination of several areas of study. Also, it can degenerate into a dull, skill-centered, drill-and-practice routine that further alienates disadvantaged students from school. It ignores the fact that there are methods of teaching basic skills through integration with the arts and the content subjects.

3. *Cooperative learning programs.* Research shows that cooperative learning arrangements produce excellent results will all students; both the brightest and the slowest students make significant gains, because one of the best ways to learn something permanently is to explain it to someone else. Cooperative learning is underused in Florida, primarily because of the restrictions of state and federal compensatory education programs. Funding restrictions prevent combining capable and deficient students in small groups for instruction, eliminating a major resource for effective education.

4. *Extended-year programs.* Although there is little likelihood that the Florida legislature will increase funding for an extended school year, summer school may be designed to achieve the same objective for students who are not achieving to their potential. The content of the summer program and the attitude of teachers, parents, and administrators are crucial; summer school must be perceived as an opportunity for growth, not as a punishment for failure to achieve.

5. *Individualized instruction through technology.* Computerized instruction is moving away from the "workbook on a tube" quality that marked its early years. Interactive video, word-processing, story starters, and the analysis of individual needs in mathematics are all within reach of public school classrooms. The motivational level of good computer software is high, and, although the initial investment in equipment is formidable, the ongoing costs are reasonable.

Regardless of the approach taken by a district or by individual schools, there are successful methods of overcoming student achievement problems. It is obvious from the body of educational research that retention in grade is not appropriate. In the imminent school improvement process mandated by the state there will be many opportunities for school advisory councils to develop innovative approaches that will eliminate nonpromotion of students. Careful and thoughtful design and implementation of effective strategies can produce schools without failure.

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